

A guide to the coping interview is then presented.

Chapter Four is about the appraisal and coping analysis, and comprises an explanation of the concepts of the method and its procedure.

Chapter Five gives an example of a special life-history interview, called a 'resource interview', designed to investigate the 'luggage' of resources the informants of your coping research project bring with them. The focus in this type of interview is on transitions through the life course, because these are closely connected with the question of access to resources (Munk, 2012). This allows a deeper understanding of the informant and their options for coping with their situation.

In the last chapter suggestions are given for ways of presenting the results of the method in scientific articles. Finally, there is an Appendix that demonstrates the analysis in use, taken from one of my research projects.



INTRODUCTION TO THE THEORETICAL BASIS OF THE RESEARCH MANUAL

Before presenting the theory, I will briefly explain the understanding of the notions of stress and coping used in the manual, since these concepts are used in very different ways both inside and outside the research literature.

THE CONCEPT OF STRESS

Many disciplines use the concept of stress in many different ways, because the theoretical and methodological contexts in which it is used diverge.³ Typically, one of three distinctive positions is taken when attempting to understand stress:

1. *The perspective from inside and out:* Stress is connected with the ability of the person to endure strain; interpretations of inner life and social relationships are not relevant. Only personality traits are pertinent. The typical concept used here is ‘resilience’.⁴
2. *The perspective from outside and in:* Stress is an influence related to certain life events, and as such also independent of interpretations of the person affected by the event. These situations are most often culturally prescribed as critical to the individual and consequently normative.⁵
3. *The relational perspective:* Stress occurs in a dynamic relationship between person and environment, as it is perceived and appraised by the person, but without neglecting the objective character of the situation.⁶



The last position is the foundation of this manual. It is concordant with contemporary psychology, which is moving away from dualistic models because they are insufficient in investigating the interpretive relationship of the subject to the environment. An ongoing transactional relationship between person and environment (or, posed in a more philosophical way, *between subject and object*) is a foundation of modern psychology (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bruner, 1958; Lazarus & Launier, 1978; Sameroff, 2009).⁷ Historically there has been a tendency in the science of psychology either to consider individuals from a purely environmental perspective, free of the interpreting person, or to adopt a purely intra-psychic perspective, examining the individual independently of the influences of their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This division refers to a classic conflict in psychology between different scientific ideals, which in turn stem from different understandings of what a human being is like. But it also refers to a – perhaps much deeper – theoretical problem in philosophy and psychology about how to bridge the gap between the mental and the surrounding world, and to what extent the individual is influenced by their social and cultural context. This is a fundamental philosophical conflict in psychology.⁸ The problem of how to find out what is going on in the inner world of the subject is another classical problem of psychology and other sciences of which the human being is the object. The first and second positions listed above represent the either–or dichotomy that neglects Thomas & Thomas’ classic theorem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979: 23):

If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.

The third position, the relational perspective, builds implicitly on this theorem, which recognises the transactional relationship between person and environment and the (deep) influence of perception and interpretation of the environment on cognition, emotions and behaviour. This is the mainstream position in



modern psychology. It does not mean that the environment of the subject should be ignored in its objective sense (which is what happens when you only take a first-person perspective). The environment cannot be made to disappear through interpretations. The consequence is that every research project that studies a coping process should follow a double track: firstly, *the perspective of the subject on the environment – or the first-person perspective* on the environment, and secondly *the same environment* described as objectively as possible – independent of the subject under study. This perspective could also be called the ‘life circumstances’ of the person studied. This objectively described analysis is an *analysis of conditions*.⁹

The term ‘stress’, however, will be used very sparsely in the manual, precisely because the concept has obtained so many different meanings. Apart from the three mentioned positions, stress can also be ‘positive’ or ‘negative’, where ‘positive’ stress is related to constructive activity, and ‘negative’ stress is related to problems or burdens that do not disappear and are perceived as harmful by the person in question. Here, the terms ‘burden’ and ‘negative emotions’ will primarily be used. When the term ‘stress’ is used, it signifies only negative stress.

THE CONCEPT OF COPING

The term ‘coping’ has been used as an expression of a positive outcome in some theoretical traditions, but also in the language of daily life: ‘He coped well with the situation?’; ‘Can you cope?’. The psychodynamic tradition of ‘coping with it’ is generally opposed to pathology: ‘coping’ means solving problems, while non-coping or use of defences is considered a sign of pathology. Here, ‘defence’ is a concept from psychoanalysis, defined as an unconscious and pathological protection against anxiety. Lazarus does not use the concept in this way, however. The danger in using the term in the psychodynamic way is that judgement of a person’s way of acting and reacting to a burden very easily



CONTENTS

becomes normative. The *personal meaning* of a situation is very easily overlooked, and it is personal meaning that decides whether a coping process is initiated. A dualistic and very categorical ‘verdict’ of ‘normal’/‘pathological’ or ‘right’/‘wrong’ could be the result. The transactional analysis in this book is not concerned with the categories of ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’. Rather, the objective is to investigate the particular perspective of the individual person in their struggle to regain control over important life issues. This does not mean, however, that we cannot analyse whether the person is acting appropriately in order to reach their goals. Are they really acting in accordance with their own interests?

In the psychodynamic understanding of the concept of coping we also find an underlying concept of control standing in for the ‘normal’, which is a debateable matter because the outset of a burden process is a loss of control and rarely does the person succeed in regaining control of the situation. This is seen, for example, in situations of irreversible losses. Situations of loss of control as part of the human condition could not by definition be called pathological. Sometimes – and very often – it is the social surroundings that intervene and solve the problems; sometimes they resolve themselves, as in the case of some diseases. In other words, we need a broader understanding of what is happening during the coping process when a person is struggling to regain control by attempting to mobilise resources that are not currently available to them. In the words of Lazarus, ‘coping’ is understood in the following way in this manual:

Constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984: 141).

Lastly, a warning about the way coping processes are labelled in English: be aware of the terminology. Sometimes coping processes are called coping *strategies* or coping *mechanisms*. This



CONTENTS